

Lost Words

An Essay on Translatability in the Mirror of Paul Celan's Poetry

The translatability of Paul Celan's poetry has been a current problem in literary studies arresting the attention of literary translators and scholars about since the 1980s, not only in Hungary and Europe, but also in the United States.

If we have a glance at George Steiner's opinion about the translatability of Paul Celan's poems, we may see that he approaches the issue with serious doubts. Steiner claims that it is also doubtful whether Celan himself wanted his readers to *understand* his poetry, conceiving his statement connected to the analyses of the poem entitled *Das gedunkelte Splitterecho – The darkened echo-splinter* (?). Steiner writes that meaning is a temporary phenomenon, and the poems can be understood only momentarily, since another interpretation of the same poem will decode the text in a partly or completely different way, exploring different layers and structures of meaning. Literature wants to break out from the frameworks of everyday human language, becoming the author's own idiolect, heading for untranslatability, unrepeatability in another language (Steiner 2005: 158-159).

In her doctoral thesis Noémi Kiss refers on the approaches of Paul de Man and Walter Benjamin (Kiss 2003: 76-77). According to Benjamin, translation is only the temporary dissolution of the alienation of language; at the same time, historically it becomes more canonised, since in an optimal case a translated text cannot be translated further. Translation is a text that has its own identity,

serving for *reading* together with the original artwork, constituting the metaphor of reading (De Man 1997: 182-228). However, according to De Man the situation of the translator is ironic, since the danger of mis-translation, misinterpretation is hiding in every single translation; i. e., translation itself automatically makes re-translation(s) necessary. Translation is not a progress that has a final goal, it has no final result, but each translation is a new station towards the more complete understanding of a given text written in a foreign language, interpreted by the given translator.

According to Noémi Kiss in case of a translation the translator and the reader evidently have to consider the possible differences between the two languages, and in the analysis of a translated poem the text cannot automatically be treated as identical with the original source language poem, and the possible similarities and differences of the source text and the target text must also be examined in a literary analysis (Kiss 2003: 69). The question may arise how much is Paul Celan still Paul Celan in a given translation. Would be a more exact statement that a given translation is the common artwork of the poet and the translator, since the translator always necessarily adds something to the original text, and he or she also takes certain elements from the content and semantic structures of the source text, mainly if the literary translator is also a poet who forms the translated text according to his/her own notions, integrating it into his/her own artistic works.

Jacques Derrida claims that the radical differences between languages necessarily mean serious problems for literary translators (Derrida 1997: 119). Noémi Kiss, referring to Derrida quotes the so-called Babel-metaphor according to which translation, at least the exact translation saving every single element of the meaning from one language into another is almost impossible, since different human languages after their evolution constitute enclosed structures, and the passing between them is not completely possible. This approach is very similar to Paul Celan's concept of language – human language generally has its

limits and is not able to express everything, then why would it be possible to *translate* something said or written in a given language into another, similarly imperfect and limited language?

However, if we accept the supposition that translation in the traditional sense is nearly impossible and we had better speak about interpretations, re-writings of a given poem, it may also be stated that translating poetry itself is also poetry, since it does not only transliterate the foreign author's work into the literature and culture of the target language, but it also re-thinks, re-interprets, rewrites the given work, creating another poem that is close to the original one, but it is not identical to the source text. It raises the question whether or not poetry translation can be treated as an intertextual phenomenon, since the translated text evidently refers to the source text, a discourse evolves between them, but the two texts – and it may be agreed by most of literary scholars and translators – cannot be treated as identical structures.

Hans Georg Gadamer states that no-one can be bilingual in the hermeneutic sense of understanding – one's own native language plays a more serious role in understanding; that is, translation should necessarily be a kind of trans-coding of the source text into the mother tongue of the translator (Gadamer 1984: 269-273). Noémi Kiss states about Gadamer's and Benjamin's approach of translation that Gadamer describes understanding, our universal wish to defeat the alienation of language as a permanent act of translation – understanding and translation are a compromise with the alien character of language, recognising that everything can be *understood* only up to a certain degree (Kiss 2003: 155). According to Gadamer's approach the task of the literary translator is to create a third language as a bridge between the source language and the target language, and this bridge language somehow should integrate both of them. Via this process, translation also becomes a historical phenomenon that makes it possible to understand a given text in a given historical age up to a certain degree (Gadamer 1984: 271). Walter Benjamin's concept of translation is very

similar to Gadamer's notion – translation gives the chance to a given text to live on, not only to survive. As the sentences of life are harmonised with the living themselves, without meaning anything for them, the translation of a given text is evolving from the original one (Kiss 2003: 66).

Perhaps the scholarly literature cited above reveals that the translation Paul Celan's poetry into any language from German is not a simple task for a literary translator, and it may hinder the complete understanding of the texts that they were written in German, in the poet's mother tongue to which he had a controversial relationship and from which he wanted to break out. Is it possible to *translate* poems that intend to destroy even the standards of their own language, heading for something outside human language?

Different scholarly literatures by and large agree that the translations made from Celan's poems, due to the multiple coding, the frequent intertextual references and the obscurity and hermetism ruling between them nearly always have some interpretative nature; that is, the translation of a given text written by Celan also necessarily becomes a reading of the poem.

Hungarian poet and literary historian György Rába states that a kind of 'beautiful faithlessness' can be observed in certain poetry translations comparing them to their original source text, and the translator's own poetic voice frequently speaks from translated poem, combined with the poet's original voice (Rába 1969: 12). That is, a literary translator does not only mechanically transcribe words based on the use of a dictionary, but makes an attempt to decode and understand the text written in the foreign language. Since translation often involves interpretation, the translator has to make decisions – on these grounds, the result of the translation of Celan's or any other author's given poem can be considered as the result of poetic activity, and the translation is not only the author's, but also the translator's artwork that may be integrated into the oeuvre of the translator. A poem can be understood differently by different translators, if a poem exists in several translations in parallel, then it is nearly

necessary that the readings of the same poem in the target language shall also be slightly or completely different.

After examining some aspects of the possible problems around the translation of Paul Celan's poetry, now I attempt to examine some concrete examples of translation within the sphere of the English language – John Felstiner's English transcriptions, beginning with a few earlier poems by Celan, but mainly selecting from the author's more mature late poetry that may be more interesting for scholarly analysis. I would like to begin with one of Celan's emblematic poem entitled *Tenebrae*, which is a reference to the biblical darkness falling upon the world after Jesus Christ's crucifixion.

JOHN FELSTINER'S TRANSLATION:

Tenebrae

Near are we, Lord,
near and graspable.

Grasped already, Lord,
clawed into each other, as if
each of our bodies were
your body, Lord.

Pray, Lord,
pray to us,
we are near.

Wind-skewed we went there,
went there to bend

over pit and crater.

Went to the water-trough, Lord.

It was blood, it was
what you shed, Lord.

It shined.

It cast your image into our eyes, Lord.
Eyes and mouth stand so open and void, Lord.

We have drunk, Lord.
The blood and the image that was in the blood, Lord.

Pray, Lord.
We are near.

THE ORIGINAL GERMAN POEM:

Tenebrae

Nah sind wir Herr,
nahe und greifbar.

Gegriffen schon, Herr,
ineinander verkrallt, als wär
der Leib eines jeden von uns

dein Leib, Herr.

Bete, Herr,
bete zu uns,
wir sind nah.

Windschief gingen wir hin,
gingen wir hin, uns zu bücken
nach Mulde und Maar.

Zur Tränke gingen wir, Herr.

Es war Blut, es war,
was du vergossen, Herr.

Es glänzte.

Es warf uns dein Bild in die Augen, Herr,
Augen und Mund stehn so offen und leer, Herr.

Wir haben getrunken, Herr.
Das Blut und das Bild, das im Blut war, Herr.

Bete, Herr.
Wir sind nah.

The poem cited above entitled *Tenebrae* is one piece of Celan's fairly early poetry, full of biblical and other religious references. First of all, the title probably refers to the darkness that fell upon the world after Jesus Christ's death

on the cross. It can be interpreted as a so-called counter-psalm or anti-psalm, since it is written in the traditional psalm form (a prayer to God), but it is turned upside down, since it is the poetic speakers, a group of people wandering in the desert who calls up God to pray to *them*. Probably, the poem intends to express the controversies of the world after the Holocaust and the Second World War, suggesting that the traditional order of the world simply turned upside down, and nothing can be considered as holy anymore.

Comparing Felstiner's translation and the original German poem written by Celan it can be seen that the first two lines of the poem are nearly literally identical in the original text and in the translation, the translator even preserves the inversion 'Nah sind wir...' – 'Near are we...'. What can be spectacular as for comparison, in my opinion, at first appears in the seventh line of the poem. 'Pray, Lord...' – 'Bete, Herr...' in itself may mean in English that 'We pray to us, God...'; i. e., in English this traditional form is not unconditionally imperative, whereas in German it is evidently a second person singular imperative form (or a first person singular declarative form, but it lacks the obligatory grammatical subject 'ich'). Furthermore, the verb 'beten' in German does not only mean 'pray' in the religious sense, but it also means 'beg' to someone without even any religious connotation – 'beten' and 'beg', since it is spoken about closely related Germanic languages, may also have some common etymology. In the ninth line of the poem, in my opinion, it can be questioned whether the German compound 'windschief' is evidently 'wind-skewed' in English, since it may also mean something like 'chased by wind' or 'hindered by wind', but the translator had to make certain decisions. It may also be one of the remarkable characters of the translation that in the thirteenth line of the poem, while Celan wrote 'Zur Tränke gingen wir...', Felstiner wrote 'Went to the water-trough...', simply omitting the grammatical subject present in German, and it could certainly be also present in the English translation – i. e., the omission of the subject does not seem to be justified, although it may mirror the

translator's intention to preserve Celan's fragmented poetic language. In the fourteenth and fifteenth line it seems also that the translator manages to remain faithful to the original version – in German, the lines 'Es war blut, es war, / was du vergossen, Herr.' may either refer to the blood of men that God 'shed' as the punishing God of the Old Testament, or God's, i. e. Jesus Christ's blood that he 'shed' for the salvation of men. As we can see in Felstiner's translation, 'It was blood, it was, / what you shed, Lord.' makes the same interpretation possible, not deciding whether it is the punishing God who 'shed' the blood of probably pagan / disobedient men, or it is God who 'shed' his own blood for the salvation of men. In the twentieth line of the poem it is also interesting that the line 'Wir haben getrunken, Herr.' is 'We have drunk, Lord.' in Felstiner's translation; i. e. the translator even wants to preserve the tense of the original version of the poem – the so-called *Perfekt* is the German counterpart of the English Present Perfect Tense, although little differences may occur; e. g., in German where there is *Perfekt*, in English there may also be Simple Past in many cases. In the last line it is also interesting that although it is nearly the same as the first line of the poem, there is no inversion: 'Wir sind nah.' Felstiner's translation also preserves this lack of inversion with the very simple sentence 'We are near.'

It may be stated that Felstiner's translation of *Tenebrae* is a fairly exact, form- and content-faithful English transcription of the original poem that can rather be treated as a *translation* in the traditional sense than an interpretation / adaptation. The main reason for this fact may be that this poem is one of Celan's early, linguistically simpler works which I intended to use as an example of this period of the author's poetry, but henceforth I would like to examine with a few later, more mature poems by Celan, comparing them with their English translations.

JOHN FELSTINER'S TRANSLATION:

IN RIVERS north of the future

I cast the net you

haltingly weight

with stonewritten

shadows.

THE ORIGINAL GERMAN POEM:

IN DEN FLÜSSEN nördlich der Zukunft

werf ich das Netz aus, das du

zögernd beschwerst

mit von Steinen geschriebenen

Schatten.

The poem cited above is one of Celan's much later and much more hermetic poetry that probably means a much larger challenge to any translator. It was published in the volume entitled *Atemwende – Breathturn* in 1967, only three years before the author's tragic suicide.

I am aware of the fact that the poem above cannot simply be *analysed* in the traditional way, since it has its own hermetic poetic world; therefore, I only mention that the poetic speaker symbolically casts his net in the rivers in some imaginary country where someone that he calls as 'you' weights his fishing net with 'stonewritten shadows'. Stone is a traditional element of Jewish Mysticism that may have several connotations; e. g., Jewish people often put a stone on the grave of the dead to express their respect and memory felt for them. The shadows may refer to the fact that what appear in the net are not real, only their shadows can be perceived by the speaker – it can be a reference to one of the greatest dilemmas of Celan's poetry, the incapability of language to

communicate or express any explicit content. It can be mentioned German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer deals with the topic of the relation of ‘you’ and ‘I’ in Paul Celan’s poetry, but in the present article I would rather concentrate on the similarities and differences between the original and the translated version of the poem (Gadamer 1993: 421).

It may be a spectacular difference between the original version and the translation of the poem that while Celan starts his poem with the beginning ‘*In den Flüssen*’ – ‘*In the rivers*’, Felstiner translates it only as ‘In rivers...’, omitting the definite article present in German, annihilating (!) the definite character of the poem, placing it into an indefinite landscape. Seemingly it is only one little word, one little difference, but it may change the whole atmosphere of this otherwise very short poem. It is also questionable whether the German verb ‘aus/werfen’ meaning ‘to cast out’ is simply ‘cast’ in English, since as if in the German version it were stressed that the poetic speaker ‘casts out’ his net in the rivers. Whether the German word ‘zögernd’ is the most appropriately translated into English with the word ‘haltingly’ may also be a question. It is also interesting that while Celan does not use a compound neologism in his original poem in the penultimate line while neologisms are very characteristic of his poetry, Felstiner translates the expression ‘von Steinen geschrieben’ literally meaning ‘written by stones’ into a compound neologism ‘stonewritten’ as if he would like to become ‘*more celanian*’ than Paul Celan himself.

After the short examination of the otherwise also short poem it may be established that there are spectacular differences between the original version and the English transliteration of the same text; i. e., they cannot be considered identical, and their separate analysis may even lead to slightly different readings. Felstiner’s English translation has a strongly interpretative character that digresses from Celan’s original text, making certain decisions within the process of reading and translation.

JOHN FELSTINER'S TRANSLATION:

TO STAND in the shadow
of a scar in the air.

Stand-for-no-one-and-nothing.
Unrecognized,
for you
alone.

With all that has room within it,
even without
language.

THE ORIGINAL GERMAN POEM:

STEHEN im Schatten,
des Wundenmals in der Luft.

Für-niemand-und-nichts-Stehn.
Unerkannt,
für dich
allein.

Mit allem, was darin Raum hat,
auch ohne
Sprache.

The poem cited above is one of Celan's emblematic work from his late poetry that was also published in the volume entitled *Atemwende – Breathturn*. Although it is also a hermetic and hardly decodably poem, it may be stated that in fact it refers to the task of the poet – 'to stand', under any circumstances, to stand, fight and write, without any reward.

Examining the first two lines it can be spectacular that while Celan writes 'im Schatten des Wundenmals' that literally means 'in the shadow of the scar', Felstiner translates the German definite article into an indefinite article – 'in the shadow of a scar'. The definite 'Wundenmal' – 'scar' created by becomes indefinite in the translation, and via this little modification the whole poem may lose its definite character.

However, despite the seemingly little difference between the original and the translated text, in the second paragraph of the poem the translation and the original version seem to be nearly completely identical. The neologism by Celan 'Für-niemand-und-nichts-Stehn' is translated by Felstiner into 'Stand-for-no-one-and-nothing', although the 'Stehn' – 'stand' element of the original and the translation are in different places, Celan's original text ends in 'Stehnn', while Felstiner's translation begins with 'stand', but this difference probably derives from the grammatical differences between German and English.

The third paragraph of the poem may show differences in its first line – while in German Celan writes 'Mit allem, was darin Raum hat', Felstiner translates this line into 'With all that has room within it'. However, Celan's original line may also mean 'With all for which there is enough room / space within'. Felstiner made a decision, but this decision is not unconditionally the best one and the meaning of the two lines in German and English, although they can mean approximately the same, they can also be interpreted differently. It is not evident whether the German noun 'Raum' should be translated into its German etymological counterpart 'room', since it may rather mean 'space' in this context. Nevertheless, there may be no doubt about the fact that the lines

‘auch ohne / Sprache’ are well-translated into English with the the expression ‘even without / language’.

Similar to the previous poem compared in original and in translation, in the case of the present poem it can also be established that the translation has a strongly interpretative character, and the translator digressed from the original version at several places. The lack of a definite article, as seen above, may modify the whole atmosphere of a given poem in translation compared to the original text. That is why I think that it would rather be more exact to speak about ‘adaptations / interpretations’ instead of ‘translations’ in the case of the transliterated versions of Paul Celan’s certain, mainly late and mature poems.

JOHN FELSTINER’S TRANSLATION:

THREADSUNS

over the grayblack wasteness.

A tree-

high thought

strikes the light-tone: there are

still songs to sing beyond

humankind.

THE ORIGINAL GERMAN POEM:

FADENSONNEN

über der grauschwarzen Ödnis.

Ein baum-

hoher Gadanke

greift sich den Lichtton: es sind

noch Lieder zu singen jenseits
der Menschen.

Fadensonnen – Threadsuns is one of the emblematic and well-known pieces of Celan's late poetry. The poem is not so hard to decode as several of Celan's late texts, since it seems to mirror the author's philosophy of art. The short piece consisting only a few lines is probably a vision about the *language beyond human language*, a system of representation that may be able to tell the untellable beyond the limits of human language and sing the 'songs beyond humankind'. However, this vision can also be interpreted in a negative way, since it is possible that in the world in which the songs are to be sung humankind exists no more – the question whether or not human beings are necessary for the existence of art and poetry may arise.

Analysing the translation and the original text, it can be observed that the beginning word of the poem is a neologism that probably means late autumn sunlight, but it is questionable in the case of Paul Celan's word creatures. The unusual neologisms in Celan's poetry may be treated as the elements of an independent, new poetic languages in which the words get rid of the limits of their traditional meanings. Felstiner's translation of Celan's neologism may be treated as precise, since the German word 'Faden' means 'thread' in English, although other interpretations are also possible.

It is also an interesting character of Felstiner's translation that the german compound adjective 'grauschwarz' is translated into English as 'grayblack', which is an exact translation, but it may also be considered that the German adjective grau – gray has a common stem with the noun 'Grauen' – 'horror'. Certainly, this semantic fact cannot be translated into English, but something is necessarily lost in translation. The compound adjective 'baumhohe' (baumhoch in undeclined form) is translated into English as 'tree-

high', and Felstiner even preserves the poetic hyphenation of the word in his own text.

Another difference between the original and the translated version of the poem can be that while in the original version Celan uses the verb 'greift sic' that approximately means 'grasp something', in Felstiner translation we can read that the tree-high thought 'strikes' the light-tone, and this verb creates a much stronger poetic imagery than Celan's original verb use. In this sense, Felstiner's translation is rather interpretative, creating the text's own reading in English. Furthermore, the last word of Celan's original poem is only 'Menschen' that means only 'men, humans', while Felstiner translates it into 'humankind', which gives a much more solemnly connotation to the English version of the poem, digressing from the atmosphere of the original.

It may be established that the English translation of one of Paul Celan's classic poems by John Felstiner strongly *interprets* the original one, creating its own poetic world in English; therefore, reading the English counterpart of *Fadensonnen* demands the analyst to consider the fact that not each translated text can be treated as identical with the original one, mainly when it is spoken about poetry translation.

JOHN FELSTINER'S TRANSLATION:

WORLD TO BE STUTTERED AFTER,

in which I'll have been
a guest, a name
sweated down from the wall
where a wound licks up high.

THE ORIGINAL GERMAN POEM:

DIE NACHZUTOTTERNDE WELT,

bei der ich zu Gast
gewesen sein werde, ein Name
herabgeschwitzt von der Mauer,
an der eine Wunde hochleckt.

The poem cited above was published in the volume *Schneepart – Snow-part* in 1971, one year after the author's death. It is also a poem that mirrors poetic and epistemological problems. The poetic speaker claims himself to be only the guest of the world, identifying the world (or himself?) with a name that is sweated down from the wall. The hermetic, visionary world of the poem may even be terrific – the world is to be 'stuttered after'; i. e., no knowledge can be conceived, communicated by human language. The limits of human language and the wish to create a new poetic language is one of the main topics of the celanian poetry – the present, fairly well-known poem may represent the same approach to language.

Comparing the original text of the poem and its version translated into English it can be seen that the strange tense structure, the Future Perfect in German, 'bei der ich zu Gast gewesen werde' is preserved in the translation – Felstiner writes 'by which I'll have been a guest', suggesting that the poetic speaker *will have been* a guest in some point of the future; i. e., the unusual temporal dimension of the poem is not lost in translation. However, what is a compound participle in German – 'nachzutotternde' cannot be translated into English with a similar compound, only with the expression 'to be stuttered after'. This solution, on the other hand, means that the unusual composition of words that is one of the main characteristics of Paul Celan's poetry is lost in this case of translation, the translation adds and takes certain elements, but this untranslatability of the compound structure derives from the differences between English and German. If we have a glance at the german compound

‘herabgeschwitzt’ which really means ‘sweated down from somewhere’ in English, we may see that it is not translated into English with another compound either. However, Felstiner maybe could have translated the compound into English as ‘downsweated’ which would certainly sound strange, but since Paul Celan is a master of the creation of strange, unnatural poetic compounds, it might even be preserved in English – i. e., what sounds strange in German should also sound strange and unnatural in the English translation, although it is merely a supposition.

Concluding Remarks

Hungarian literary historian Mihály Szegedy-Maszák examines the issue of untranslatability and the chance of traslateability in a general aspect (Szegedy-Maszák 2008: 235-248). It may seem evident that in case of translation the issue of the differences between languages and the question of temporality arise; that is, the phenomenon of untranslatability must exist to some degree, as it is impossible to create completely form- and / or content-faithful translations. Certainly, reading the English translations of Paul Celan’s certain poems it becomes evident that as it is mentioned by Imre Madarász that in parallel with untranslatability, translatability also exists to some degree, rather it is worth dealing with the question how much the translation of a given text is able to represent the atmosphere and references of the original text (Madarász 2005: 86-88). As it seems to be justified by the translations above, the translation of a given artwork in the target language is an independent literary entity, and the parallel translations of the same source text may not be considered identical to each other either. Perhaps it is not an overstatement that there can be as many Paul Celan as translators within the literature of a given language into which certain works of the author were translated – all translations speak differently, mediating certain elements of the original poem in a different proportion being a reading in itself, and it may depend on the attitude of the analyst which

translation he or she chooses or whether he or she draws back to the original text of the poem avoiding the translations. Certainly, it has to be done if a given work to be analysed has not yet been translated into the native language of the analyst, but if a text was already translated into a certain language, in my opinion, the translated text should not be avoided and ignored by the analyst, since it is an already existing reading of the source text that is part of the literature belonging to the target language. I do not think that it would unconditionally mean a problem in interpretation if a given text exists in translation, even if in several different translations, since a translation may add more aspects to the analysis of the same work. Although meaning may really be enclosed in language, and Celan's complex, self-reflexive, hermetic poems evidently mean challenge to literary translators, their translation, if not even completely faithfully, but is possible and is able to contribute to the success of understanding them.

Although as if some scholarly literatures in Hungary and elsewhere had mystified the issue of the translatability of the celanian poetry, it seems that the hermetis, obscurity and self-reflexive quality, at least in the majority of the cases, can be transliterated from the source language into several target languages including English. However, when analysing a poem by Celan in translation it cannot be forgotten that the given text is a *translation / interpretation*; i. e., it is worth knowing and examining the original German version of the given poem, but it does not evidently mean that the translated quality of a given text leads to incorrect interpretations. In my opinion, on the contrary, the translated and the original version of a given poem may even complete each other, adding extra aspects to the analysis and interpretation. The celanian poetry and its transliteration in any language require specially sensitive reading, but the original poem and the translated version do not unconditionally disturb each other's interpretation, they rather add something to each other, supporting each other's textual structures. A *good translation* (I use this term

very carefully, since it is a very subjective judgement which translation of which poem is 'good' and how) may be able to legitimise a foreign text within the culture and literature of the target language, and even a higher, more complete interpretation may evolve from the interaction of the translated and the original text. In my opinion, John Felstiner's interpretative English translations of Paul Celan's poetry evidently added something to Celan's Anglo-Saxon reception, supporting the fact that on the one hand, all texts of the world literature are translatable to some degree; on the other hand, Celan's textual universe, since it does not always intend to be unambiguous even in its original German language, via the translations richer, deeper, more complete interpretations can evolve than only in German. All national literatures into which he was translated can have *their own Paul Celan* that makes the segments of unusual and richly whirling poetic world sound from different points of view, not falsifying the original version for the readers.

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